



I Didn't Forget! by DoctorStrangerThings

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Hurt-Comfort, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Mike W.

Pairings: Eleven/Jane H./Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-22 11:47:42

Updated: 2017-11-24 13:22:15

Packaged: 2019-12-17 05:01:41

Rating: T

Chapters: 2

Words: 7,654

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Mike had a plan...a plan for that special day in February, one to show your love for that special someone, the day that represented all that holds together a strong relationship. But..Mike Wheeler believes he kinda goofed up his original plans, and she may not be all that happy when he finally reveals...that he didn't forget.

1. How It All Began

Mike hurried frantically up the familiar path, his own secret route through the thick woods and prickly underbrush. The ground was covered in a thick coat of fresh snow, as it continued to fall in a comforting drizzle of flakes that glided down to the earth, his hurried boot tracks the only disturbance to this serene setting. Sticks cracked and the dirt crunched as Mike breathed heavily in and out, puffs of wheezy mist emitting from his pale lips. With his sagging bag on and the thick heavy coat that his mom made him wear this cold February day, it was a group effort of his gangling body to propel himself this fast. But it was the goal at the end of this journey that made him be the **Zoomer** during this part of the day. It was his motivation every single time.

Eventually, he saw the clearing coming up ahead, the wooden structure of his destination beginning to become visible between the looming trees that marked this landscape as theirs. Smoke blazed out from the cabin's chimney, a gentle reminder that inside- one could find a cozy abode of warmth and comfort and sanctuary. Mike smiled contemplatively, shivering with the freezing temperature outside and an excitement for what was to come next. Now slowing down- pacing his steps to a steadying series of movements- he spotted the tripwire and hopped over it, with a knowing glance.

Precautions were always necessary, and Mike had become used to the presence of these rules. *"Hopper isn't here yet."*, He had realized when he first went past the usual parking spot. A grin had spread across his face. It meant he knew and approved of what Mike had in store..even if...he hadn't mentioned it to him yet. Although they still had their disagreements from time to time, Mike already realized how important Hopper had been so far, and could at least understand his intentions; regarding El. She needed that someone in her life, one who wasn't using or manipulating her as some demented father figure, but instead, filled in that role naturally and honorably. She needed a family, and they were all working together to provide that. To help her heal and move past the prison that had kept her for so long. And if the bad people ever, ever returned, they all knew to be prepared. It was a promise; she would never leave him...her true

family, again.

Now, as Mike made his way towards the cabin's creaky old steps, he readied for the much-anticipated surprise he had in store. *"God..please don't be mad at me. The last few days have been rough, but you would understand..."* He spoke in his head to an imaginary girl.

With a narrow look towards the nearby structure, his foot touched the first wooden plank, and it emitted a painful squeak from within. Mike, grimacing with how loud the sound was, kept his foot steadied there. "Dammit!", he hissed to himself. He didn't want her to hear his approach right away. As far as El was aware, he wasn't even going to be coming to the cabin this cold Thursday afternoon. That's how it all started on Monday.

She kept on asking him the days before, trying to find out whether or not he would visit, and Mike forced himself to act nonchalant and say, "No, I have a big assignment due on Friday, so...I have to work with my partner after school."

"Partner? What partner?", she had asked with a tinge of disappointment in her gentle voice.

He felt really bad for leading her on like this, but he knew that at the end, it would all be worth it. "Uh...Stacy, she's a girl in my geography class.", Okay, now he was being mean.

El's face turned into an even frown as she blinked more rapidly. After a lengthening moment of silence, Mike had spoken up again. "Uh..the teacher picked the partners for us, so I have to work with her.."

"Oh. Okay."

El had then become quiet for most of that afternoon. He kind of intended it as a little joke, but now he was going to have to follow through with it. *"You jerk, Wheeler! You didn't have to mention another girl.."*, he just prayed she wouldn't get too mad at him.

That was on Monday, yes, and before he left that day to go back home, he saw the calendar flipped open to February 1985- hanged on her bedroom wall. Scanning over a few days to the right, he saw it,

and his heart fluttered with a bittersweet double-twinge; one in guilt of this little trick he was playing and the other anxiously anticipating his surprise reveal:

THURSDAY. FEBRUARY 14TH And in smaller, chicken scratch writing below: *"Valentyne Day with Mike"*

In seeing that, Mike felt himself start to melt to the floor, a sudden emotional wallop hitting him like a 100-ton force of raw warmth. For every single night that he lay in bed, in simple astonishment of how lucky he was to have Jane "El" Hopper, this was just as, if not even more, of a surreality. Every time he was around her, or talking to her, or making jokes and laughing with this perfect girl, he never failed to be in wonder of what led to it all. "Imagine telling that story of how you met years from now, just twelve years old, in the woods on that fateful stormy night.."

God, for all the torment they went through; the pain and heartbreak and separation, it was worth it at the end. No matter what..it was all these factors that led to the now.

Mike wished he could have just mentioned it to her right then and there, as he heard her changing the television channel with her powers again, in the main room. There was the crunchy sound of her eating the Nilla Wafers that he brought for her, something a bit different from the usual eggos; As per Dustin's recommendation of course. She was probably trying to find a good show to watch, to get her mind off of Mike's underwhelming "news". Turning back to face the calendar, it was then on Monday the 11th, that he made it a necessity to make El's first real Valentine's Day something she would never forget.

For what she would have to go through for the next few days, feeling as if Mike didn't care...or even forgot- he knew it was his mission to make this the best.

"Mike? What are you doing..?", El was standing by the doorway, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Oh..I think I dropped a pencil..", he then feigned a determined look on his face, as if he was looking frantically around the room. "Crap,

probably rolled under the bed.. Never mind, let's go watch some TV!" Mike walked over to the doorway where she stood, grabbing her hand and interlacing her fingers with his.

"You can pick the show we watch today. okay?". He smiled widely at her, and she grinned back, nodding enthusiastically, happy that he wasn't going to be leaving just yet. But as they walked towards the sofa in the main living room, he caught her glancing back towards the bedroom, a sad look on her face.

"Oh no, she was hoping I mentioned the calendar in there..", Every increasing sign of her dissatisfaction made him ache more and more. *"Play it cool, Wheeler. It's only until Thursday. We both had to wait for much longer before.."*

Making their way to the couch, they both plopped down on the comfy cushions, El honing in on the channel knob with concentration. They were fairly silent- almost as if secretly both aware of this unspoken talk between them- but soon enough, they got back into the happy mood of things. El ended up choosing cartoon reruns, and Mike knew she did it for him. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek, thanking her and promising he would explain all the events as they unfolded. El blushed, looking on in wonder as his eyes blazed with the colors of the intro appearing on screen. Quite truly, this was one of the things she lived for. To see him happy and being so close to her. She snuggled close to his side. Even if he forgot about Valentine's, she could accept it. But...maybe he would mention it tomorrow? El hoped so, she really did, as they continued to watch the episode.

"So basically! King Miro is the father of King Randor, and Man-At-Arms finds the bracelet with Miro's symbol, see?", Mike pointed excitedly towards the colourful screen, as El smiled with a gleam of curiosity. It was another He-Man episode, one of Mike's favorites, and she just loved seeing him so passionate about it. El nodded her head vigorously, she didn't always grasp all the names and such of the characters; but Mike was explaining well enough for her to get a basic sense. He was always good at telling tales, or making them himself..

"So..they are going to find King Miro?", El asked; hoping she passed

the correctness test.

Mike's face spread into one of his best smiles yet. "Yeah! You got it."

"And the merch- ant? He found the bracelet first?", El looked down towards her own blue bracelet that Hopper had given her. It meant a lot to both of them.

"Yep! He found it in the Swamps of Enchantment. They're going to look for King Randor now, who was missing...for a while", Mike smiled softly, taking El's hand once again. "Thanks El. I can be a real wastoid with me talking all the time, but..you're so patient sometimes, with me, with everyone..", Mike pulled El closer, holding her in his arms warmly. *"You're awesome.."*

El got all tingly when he talked about her like that- why did she have to stay in this place any more? She could go to Mike's house, he would protect her too. Of course, she would want to live with Hop, but a whole year until she could be out of the cabin- free to be in Hawkins?! It felt so long until that would come to be. El sighed heavily, breathing shakily out of contentedness and sad he would be leaving soon. She never wanted to leave that embrace, it felt so comfortable. *"You aren't a wastoid, Mike."*, El whispered softly to him, "I like when you talk like that"

And she did. Whenever they watched a movie, or he read her one of his comics, even when he introduced her to some new music; She glanced happily towards the Walkman player that Mike had given to her. It was Nancy's and Mike had even learned how to make a mixtape from Jonathan. El already loved Cyndi Lauper, The Police, and the other bands that Mike made sure to compile a variety of. He had taught her about synth music, his favorite type, the "electronic buzz" that he had loved ever since Blade Runner. And every now and then, El would pop in a mixtape by Mike Wheeler- her very own personal disk jockey- to listen to the little voice recordings he put in between. They were like special whispers that could be a secret between them, that El could cherish when he wasn't there in person. Her favorite happened to be his intro to Every Breath You Take, the song they had danced to first when they went to The Snowball.

"Hey, El...or Ellie..I know you don't like that one!". Then he started

laughing to himself awkwardly, she always laughed with him at that part- "Ellie" was a nickname he sometimes called her to bug the crap out of El- for some reason, she hated that extended version.

"Um..well, this is the song, that weee danced to..at the Snowball! It was our first dance ever together, and uh..well, it really means alot to me and both us us...as...a....whole.", His voice cracked towards the end, making El giggle every time. Ever since she came back, she had noticed that Mike's voice was changing...it sounded more deep. She still was getting used to him, to how he had grown, to how her hand felt different when she held his since they last had in the hallways of Hawkins Middle; running away from the bad men, and finally, in that classroom- as she lay there weakened, them both making a promise. They had both changed, and they were both learning so much about each other and the world around them, but nonetheless, El didn't find it unsettling- she found it exciting, promising.

"So, yeah, there's a story to tell behind everything, and this song..well, now we have a story to tell for years from now..", Mike's voice paused, he was probably recording this in his room, with the door shut. Then he lowered his tone down to a whisper.

"..El, remember when we made the promise? When I said..you can have as many Eggos as you want, and that...you can join the family and..you would never leave me? Well, that's going to happen...and I...I can't wait..I hope we can go places beyond Hawkins and make a lot of more memories with music..and this song. It'll always be our song..." Mike coughed into the mic, he would be turning red a lot at that point, she knew-, then he continued, "Hey...maybe we can blast this on a nice summer drive one day....", another pause, "Well, anyways, back to the song! Enjoy, El! I'm going to make more of these, full credit to Jonath-", then it cut out.

And the song started, and El would always have the largest smile on her face afterwards. At first, she didn't know what he meant with going "*beyond Hawkins*" or "*a nice summer drive one day*", but she later came to the realization- the surprise that they were secret promises, for both of them. When they were older, when they could explore the world. She had gotten a taste of that..last year, and now, she was really looking forward to exploring with Mike...for him to be her guide.

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"You do? I could be a big nerd a lot of the times, especially with the guys around!", Mike smirked timidly towards all the comics and games in front of them, stuff he had accumulated into this second home of sorts just in the past months.

"Huh?", El snapped out of her daze, turning away from the Walkman. Then she realized what he meant. "Oh..no, Mike. I am a nerd too!", she beamed, showing her perfectly imperfect pearls and putting her hands to her hips in a sarcastic exaggeration.

"Oh, really..", Mike playfully tapped El on the shoulder, speaking in a deep Mr. Man voice. "Well, I guess you can thank me, your mentor of sorts to the world of pop culture..", he started to laugh, snorting with the mock voice he used.

"Yes, thannnnks, Mike.", Maybe he was going to mention Valentine's now, she hoped? She looked on hopefully, eager with a silent sort of stare. He just smiled with his big, dog-eared grin, thinking she was expecting something else. Then, Mike slowly leaned in and pecked her a quick kiss on the lips. El's eyes went wide, well, this was still the perfect compromise; then she relaxed against his shoulders, pulling him back in, and whispered into his ear.

"Can you stay for a little longer, Mike?", Usually he kissed her like that before he was going to leave, so this meant it was almost time to depart. But, right before he whispered an answer back, the tv blared loudly- switching to a commercial break. Both of them moved apart and turned to the screen:

"GET THAT SPECIAL SOMEONE SOMETHING THEY'LL NEVER FORGET! ALL NEW VALENTINE'S MEMORABILIA AVAILABLE AT....HALLMARK!"

Then, a familiar jingle played, pictures of happy couples and their cheery storefronts filling the view in front of them. Once the ad ended, an abrupt silence filled the air. Mike had turned off the television, already up and packing his stuff in his bag. *"Why was he trying so hard to avoid the conversation? Did he not want to go on valentine's with her? Had he chosen someone else....Stacy?!".* A quizzical

and gloomy frown filled El's face as she saw him bundling on his winter coat, face towards the ground.

She wanted to just break the tension and ask him upfront..but that may make her look too...greedy or selfish. Those were both words she had learned from the daily soaps. They were not good. Maybe he was just planning to ask her right before? El convinced herself this was the case and walked up to Mike, her hands nervously jumbled together. "So...you'll come, um..tomorrow, Mike?"

"Huh?", he turned swiftly, his feet awkwardly side-pacing, "Uh..yeah, of course! I'll see you at...3:15. I'll run like usual!", he smiled weakly then heaved his bag onto his back.

"Bye, El..". Pulling her into a quick hug then swiftly leaving to go outside.

And that was how that visit ended, El feeling confused and abandoned in a way; Mike feeling utterly ashamed and guilty at how he handled that. Both Tuesday and Wednesday went the same way, with bad blocking and secret-keeping, furtive glances towards each other, and both of them finding their own ways to distract themselves from the elephant in the room. El felt very puzzled and nervous about what was going on...this situation, how Mike was acting and all.

And Mike...he was beginning to doubt if his plan to keep "*Valentine's a secret*" was even a mediocre idea. It was crap. No, it was shit, especially for El. Anyhow; he had carried it out in full, and now found himself by the cabin's doorstep.

Thursday had arrived, it was now 3:20- he had gotten a bit lost in thought- and Valentine's day for him and El was going to begin. Hopefully with no major setbacks. "*God, god...she may be really mad...*", but he knew that if he explained in the best way possible, she would come to understand what he was up to.

Steadily, Mike raised his gloved fist to the door, knowing which knock he was going to use. Not his own, which in Morse equaled "M I K E"- Heh, very fitting- but instead, the one that Hopper had always used. "US". In a concise manner, Mike did the corresponding knocks, and no more than a few seconds later, the click of the locks echoed

into the cold air. Mike hesitantly burst into a beam of white, not knowing what to expect behind that door...she thought it was going to be an early Hopper back from the police department..

Then, he pushed the wooden door open with one swift move. Boy, was he in for a surprise...

2. Figure It Out

RB- Well, thanks for the kind comments and follows for the first chapter! Really had a lot of fun reading them and also writing this second one. Get ready for some feels, emotions, and more flashbacks to times of past! I would also like to take some of your input for the future of this story and suggestions on what you may want to see. Meet you on the flip side!

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Mike carefully slid inside the cabin, only realizing what was wrong when his dark eyes shifted back up towards the common room in front of him. His eyes widened in a shocked double-take as he took in the harrowed sight. The room... it was a... mess...a real mess...

El had done this? Was...was she hurt?!

Surveying the damage which presented itself in full view, Mike saw with a building anxiety how widespread it was. His hands flew to his hair, as he pulled with a sense of frustration at the whole matter. What the hell had happened here?! There was no one in sight, just a destroyed room, torn up between everything. Books and pictures from the tall shelf near her room lay scattered in a random, careless spread across the planked floor. Surrounding tables and lamps were overturned within a varied range of harried and assorted angles. Furniture looked as if they had all been shoved at once by some universal force; a gale so powerful it had burst inside the cabin and done its deeds before departing back into nothingness...it had to be-

Muffled bumps and crashes came from the room. Her room. Mike staggered around, his eyes as wide as could be by this point. How about if somebody else had come in here? Maybe someone stepped over the tripwire, and broke in here? But no, that couldn't have been, everything seemed fine outside, there was no looks of a disturbance from the exterior elements, only in here. One step closer, Mike shuffled along towards the closed door. More sounds, a *scritch scratch* against the wooden wall, where she had hung the calendar, where she was building a new photo wall inspired by Nancy's own. She was...in there? *May-maybe El was working on some crafts project?* She

always tended to get the place a bit messy the more involved she was. Mike quickly shot down that argument of reasoning. This wasn't any freakin' happy romp of hers. No no, it was an outburst. *Another step.*

This, this was her, no doubt about it, and she...had used her abilities. If anything, it was an indication of rage, and it was all his fault. *No, no, no... It wasn't meant to be this way.* This was exactly what was the worst situation, that one percent of creeping suspicion that had lurked in the back of his mind for the past few days. Brushing it off, his thought process centered back on what was in the **now**. Why wasn't he saying anything right now aloud? The thing was, he felt at a loss of words. *I don't even know what's behind that door, what I may find.*

Another step.

I didn't know she was going to get this mad, Mike stood frozen in place, feeling a sinking dread hit him like a cement waterfall. Well, no, he was lying to himself there. He was beginning to attain that lurking feeling that perhaps she wouldn't be as thrilled when he showed up, on the Tuesday before. That quiet between them, his continued failure to acknowledge his plan, which in due part, was part of the actual **MASTER** plan! Why did he ever think this was a clever idea? And look what happened, he didn't blame her... He was a jerk and a dumbass for making her more confused by his actions than she already was by all the new things bombarded at her. He had ruined their first Valentine's. *Another step.*

"Ahh...why am I rushing to conclusions so fast?!" Mike didn't even have the answers to this, within a span of thirty seconds, he had rushed to assume it was because of his failure to be a good Valentine. Was he really this vain? *Mike, just go and open the damn door!*

Feeling like he wanted to just escape from how paranoid he was starting to become, Mike finally budged with a faster pace. Looking towards her bedroom door-*still shut like glue in that mocking stance*- he sensed that she must be crouched in the corner wall or under her many bedsheets, crying out of pure frustration. God, he didn't mean for it to be like this. He...he had to fix it, *keep on saying that.* Right now, he would go and knock and barge into that room and show that

he wasn't a jerk at all. It was all a misunderstanding, one that was caused wholly by his own misdoing this time.

Thinking positively, he mustered up the suitable courage, *"I'll tell her right away and I'll apologize and I'll make this the best day ever. I'll try..."* Though his own internal debate wasn't satisfying him at all. He needed to act on it, he needed to solve this whole situation **right now**.

Straightening up his crooked posture and breathing shakily with a newfound determination, Mike began the final trudge towards that distant bedroom door, now seeming a world's away within his shrinking field of view. It almost felt like some force was holding him back, one that consisted solely of the self-doubting presence that was always there with him. But eventually, he reached the entrance and right when he was about to knock-

"D-don't. I can explain it...", A voice mumbled from within the confines of the small room.

There she was, he still breathed a sigh of relief, even when he had been almost certain that it was her. That ringing statement had been accompanied by once again, a jumbled mixture of sounds. She, she sounded sad- utterly broken to him. When she said those few words, there was a hint of bitterness; but it sounded more like it was targeted towards herself than the individual right outside her room.

Mike bit his lip hard, not able to utter more than a sharp exhale of breath. Then with sudden clarity, he further realized what she was thinking.

As far as she knew, El believed it was Hopper who had just come home- albeit earlier than usual. From him using the same knock, to his unintentionally heavy footfalls as he paced slowly around the main room. El was assuming Hopper was out- surveying the damage, and ready to have a shouting match with his adopted daughter.

Mike had heard about these inevitable out lashes, The Chief had pulled him to the side about it just a few weeks after the gate had been closed. Was this what she had done, was Mike responsible for all of it. If so, he had screwed up even his most utmost of promises.

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"Look, kid, I'm going to lay this out on the table right now.", He had his hand firmly on Mike's shoulder, as if to reaffirm this was a serious talk. Then he pulled back, both leaning lazily against the back of their wooden chairs.

Mike was fumbling with his new multi-function watch. The date read "**NOV 23, 1984**". He smiled. He had passed on his original calculator watch to El without hesitation. It meant a lot to both him and El; from that very first week and he wanted her to have it as a keepsake in addition to how useful it could prove to be. Mike half-heard Hopper's opening regards, nodding his head with a zoned-out glance back up and then down to the object at his mind. He was awfully fidgety at this moment in time.

"You...have to be careful. Take it slow, be thoughtful...an entire year has passed. Both of you have changed. A lot", Hopper was looking down at him with strong intent, as he spoke in a low tone within the main room. El was in her bedroom, door closed-*just like it was now*-but Hop had told her to go in there. They were to have a "Man-to-man" talk, as he liked to call these on numerous occasions. She had nodded with acceptance, then gave Mike an amused stare. He whispered an approval, as to say, "Go on, it's fine", and she had walked silently to the room, closing the door with a little peak outside.

Mike agreed distractedly at what Hopper had just said to him, most of his attention diverted to the sound coming from within the comfy bedroom. It was El's little radio, a Top 50 pop tune blaring out from the speakers. He recalled it as being one of her favorites, from the pocket of time he had spent with her so far. It was probably Madonna or Cyndi Lauper, he smiled thoughtfully, she liked them both equally, and so he did too.

God, they had so much to catch up on...he was still learning so much about her interests, the new ideas she had gained knowledge of, how they both had grown as people in the year...separated from each other. It's why Mike was so frantic to get out of that position, sitting there across from Hopper at the small dining table near the kitchen. He desperately wanted to return to El- he had already been there that

November evening, and a Friday to cap it off, for about two hours. The sun only remained as a faint, blistering orange glow among the treetops outside the shuttered blinds. Like usual, to start the weekend off, Mike was going to be spending the night over at the cabin. He had come a bit later than the typical 3:15 timing, due to his little detour to go and fetch his old sleeping bag from the home. This was his first official sleepover; as for the weeks before, it was either a late-night bike ride home- *and then the usual questions from his mom...and dad.* Or the other option would be the worse of the two, that he had to depart before sunset with the rest of his friends.

However, it was this night that he could stay over for the entire evening unto the next day, under Hop's supervision, of course. Mike was pumped, knowing what to bring over and he jam packed his backpack with as many games and books and toys he could carry for the school day. He just so happened to forget the sleeping bag so that's why that pitstop had to be made. After all, he didn't really want to sleep on the couch for the sleepover, a room separated from El. Nowadays, that was too much of a division for his taste.

"Kid...are you even listening to me?", Hopper tapped his fingers impatiently, or maybe in a more nervous fashion at that.

Still being new to this whole role he had taken on, handling both young teens was a bit of a challenge for the chief of Hawkins. "I know you want to go back in there, but just hear me out...", gesturing with care towards the closed door.

"Yeah, sir! Sorry, I'm just really excited, that's all...", Mike rotated back to face the gruff man in front of him and placed an attentive look on his face.

Well, at least he's trying to be considerate...or just kissing ass, Hopper thought ruefully. Then he gathered his thoughts and returned to the matter at hand. It wasn't the point to be so cynical now.

"Ok. Well, just know that she has outbursts, mood swings, just like any of you kids have at this age. And I've gotten a firsthand look at it for the past year. This lifestyle, her in the cabin, not getting to be free like all of you are...It's terrible. It's limiting her, constraining her in this box, but it has to be done."

Breathing shakily, Hop put his hands to his face, groaning with a weary incantation. "None of us want this for her...but it just has to be done...it has to...at least for now."

A silence ensued, Mike unsure how to respond to that. At that point, his frustrations towards Hopper had mostly dissipated, but now an even greater rage was stemmed towards the whole situation at large. Mike was exhausted of the secrets, the bad men, and monsters from other realms. At least one of those had been banished for now, but all the other factors must have still been out there.

All he wanted was for her to be able to join him, and his friends, in leading a regular life. Where she could go to school and learn like them all, and experience all the normal teen things that coming-of-age was made up of. He wanted to hold her hand, and talk freely in public, and kiss, and go on dates, and be together everywhere...but at this point, that was still a distant life for them all. Mike was just grateful that he had her back, had her here and with protection and at least some semblance of a permanent shelter. As he looked towards his palms and read the lines that meant nothing to him, Mike nodded at what Hopper had just said.

"I... I know. I understand. And Hopper?"

"Yeah, Kid?", he stopped rubbing his temples so intensely and looked back up with a gentler look in his older eyes.

"Of course, I'm not going to make her angry, I will never do anything to hurt her, ever." *That was the promise he had just broken.*

"El..she's...she's...", He wasn't all entirely used to opening up like this in front of the chief, but at this point, a certain level of trust had been reached, a mutual relationship. They were the two most prominent figures in her life as well. "she's everything to me. We both...get each other so much...if...you know what I mean?", fluctuating his hands in an extravagant manner, Mike only paused at the end of his little admission, his face already red with embarrassment, to now look up at a bemused Hopper.

"Hm..well I think I do.", shrugging with a smile on his face, "Believe me, she's missed you just as much as you missed her. It pained me, it

really did, to have to do it all. And I don't care how many times I say it...but I'm sorry, kid. I really am. We all understand the real threat now though...the evil. The evil of man... and more." This was getting to places he didn't expect it to wander to

Hopper looked contemplatively around the cabin, as if to reflect on everything which made up the current situation. His hand unconsciously felt around his pocket for the cigarette pack, though he now stopped himself before being able to fumble it out. He was getting better at that, especially around the kids. Clearing his throat, balled - up fist to his mouth, Hop went on.

"I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page, yeah?"

Mike nodded thoughtfully, fully on page with the man across him. He was happy that things had improved a bit between them: at least beyond the shouting and rage that filled their first conversations since the reunion.

"Yes, sir. I'm... sorry for getting so angry at first. It was just shocking, that's all. I was mad...all the lost time, that's what made me so angry."

"I know, I know. But we move past that, ok? We hold our heads up high and we help her now. Well, we all need to help each other."

"Definitely, yes."

He could sense this was a genuine moment between them. He liked the boy, he quite literally made up her world, and she made up his. They were inseparable. No point in delaying it any longer, Hopper broke the lengthening silence and flashed a rare smirk of his own.

"Well, what are you waiting for, kid? Get on in there! And have fun, ok?", he stood up, grunting with the strain in his aching back, and let loose a contented groan. "Just...don't get any ideas that I'm letting you do jack all in that enclosed space. I'm still keeping a steady eye on you, Wheeler." Hop flashed a quick *I'm Watching You* gesture, pointing his fingers in a mock accusing gesture towards the teenaged boy now standing up, tapping his own feet impatiently.

"Uh...yep...I understand!" Awkwardly, Mike then waved away and

starting literally jogging across to the door with a bounce in his step.

Hopper shook his head at the incredulity of it all. These kids made him very happy, even if he hardly showed it the way other parents would. The energy, the hopefulness, the inexperience of every concept that was new to them; It filled him with that sense of wonder, of fulfillment, that...Sara always brought to his heart. Well, no, that was different. It was before he felt the sinking weight, before he drank one can too many, or smoked like a hellhound on the way back to the inner circle. He had been so happy then, so fulfilled in life. Sara. Diane. Very long ago... sometimes he had those days where he could feel as close as could be to those days of yesteryear. With El... she inspired him in some way, she helped him back.

Sighing with the flood of memories that once again came floating to the surface, he sat down and continued to contemplate. The music flowed on to the next tune, interrupted for a moment by a faraway entertainer, as the bedroom door closed with a small creak, Mike looking back for a single second, a tinge of sadness hitting him; as he saw Hopper sitting back at the table, lost in his own train of thought.

It was a subconscious sentiment; Mike seeming to understand that there was a greater history of loss and emotion behind those elder eyes. He respected Jim Hopper, chief of police and caregiver...father...to the one he loved most. Mike went on to realize this, just by the time they had spoken so far. Sighing, knowing they both still had much to connect over, Mike shut the door and went back to *her*...every moment could be treasured between them both.

...

And it had been treasured. Oh, that night was...awesome. They laughed and, heh, he had taught her a lot about the Justice League that day, he remembered that. El tended to prefer the DC comics over the Marvel ones, even over his insistent tone that she would love the X-Men. She had yet to read one, but Mike was happy she was taking her time through some of the issues he had already given...oh...he was drifting off again. On the floor, outside the door, there lay an issue: *Legion of Superheroes #19*. El loved that super-group; it just saddened him even more to see it lying there, edges worn out and tossed like a dirty rag. *Mike, stop distracting yourself, say something. say*

something. SAY IT!

He was finally able to do it, clearing his throat: "E... El?", His voice cracked with a hard twinge, as he grimaced painfully from how weak it sounded.

But right as he uttered that singular name, the one that always made her feel safe, recognized, cared by; any instance of movement in that sealed-off bedroom, suddenly halted.

...

El heard it, the knocking. Hopper had come home early. He said he would be arriving later! She had to clean...no she couldn't...it was not enough time to clean her mess. Just as she was scooping up any last reel of the white paper that was covering the ground around the television set, that stupid knocking had started. Why now?! Of all the times, it made her feel even more...angry...no... no...ag-aghast. More aghast. She brushed away her heavyset tears, which didn't seem to stop-no matter the effort she put in to smush them across her smooth cheeks. Everything was too much right now, it was too much, and he hadn't come, and she started crying, and she tried to listen in on him through the television! But it didn't work because she wasn't focused! And now, she had ruined...ruined it. The tape, it was ruined. She had just wanted to hear his voice, to make her stop crying, but it had only made it worse. She had put the mixtape in the Walkman, and- and when it got to The Snowball song, when it started and he spoke and called her "Ellie", she couldn't bear it, and-

She had screamed. She really couldn't control it.

Everything in the room had flown apart, the old windows had creaked, not yet breaking; but just barely holding themselves together. She was happy they didn't break, but just about everything else had. Her comics had scattered, the ones Mike had given her, the new ones, and that made her scream even more, and no, things crashed and rolled and cracked and shattered.

It was only when the sounds stopped to a tense buzz of disruption...that she had noticed the tape. The Walkman, it was shattered. The Mixtape, the "case-ette" Mike always used, it was

ripped. No no no, El could only muster to think in her panicked and weary mind. The tape from the cassette, it was everywhere, tangled in a long snaky web across the wooden floorboards. It was gone, destroyed. El had lost that piece of Mike. The most important tape, possession, she could think of at that moment. And she began to cry again, not knowing what other facet she could begin to express what she was feeling at that point. Hopper was not there, and Mike...he had never showed up. El had lied to Hopper, she had said Mike planned something for them both, assured him that Mike would come for valentine's, but no, he hadn't mentioned it at all. For some reason, he didn't want to spend it with her...? It was too much for her to process, confusing, it made her feel like he had not said something. Like maybe he...*lied*? No. Friends don't lie. Especially not Mike. That thought was out of the question, even at this point.

`She had been waiting for school to end, and it was 3:15 a few minutes ago, but now this...she had 'unleashed' about half of an hour before and she could only bear to cry and cry more. Why did she feel so sad for herself?

It was as she thought this, some of the tape already rolled into a ball in her flushed hand, that the knocking started; and she jumped up; beginning to scoop the tape with some frantic drive of autonomy. Hopper couldn't see any of this, especially...not the tape. He knew how Mike made the mixtapes and gave them every so often, and he would be so mad too...El had to go and try to fix it somehow. Quickly focusing on the front door as she ducked and closed her own bedroom passage, she unlocked the series of heavy-locks with a frustrated, sobbing sigh. Her mind raced with the thoughts of putting the wrecked tape back together. Her hands fumbled with no resolve as she tried to jam the coiled tape back into the rolls, but no no, nothing seemed to be working. Mike would know...he would know. She felt a hot tear sliding down her face. Not even bothering to brush it off, she continued in a manic daze on this frivolous task.

Footsteps. Lighter than usual. No, he was coming to her door. No no. Hopper had already seen the mess. He was silent. Mad. They would shout and she would unleash again. Not like this, valentines was for love, not...not anger. El stopped for a second, all her pain and sorrow filling her streaked face and warbling tone.

"D-Don't. I can explain it...", It was all she could have mustered before falling silent again, and muffling a sickled cry. *Why was he staying silent?!*

First Mike not coming, and now her ruining the home, and Hopper getting so mad, she wanted to just be anywhere else. The footsteps-they had stopped- he was just out there, getting ready to unleash. He would say one of his usual warnings, "I'm coming in.", or "El... what did we talk about?", and it would start fine enough, but soon escalated into a shouting match of insults and swears they would regret the next day. She didn't want that, not today. And especially not on Valenti-

"E-El?"

What...was...was...that...no...it couldn't have been.

She was imagining again, she was thinking about him all day, and now, this was just another fantasy. That was Hopper out there, waiting fo-

"El? It's...me. It's Mike." The voice felt like it was surrounding her, when in reality it was pressed right against the door. Right there.

It..was. El's eyes shot straight up, her mouth gaping open with a wondrous stare on her face. Her tears didn't sting. No, she brushed them right off and shakily stood up. It was...Mike. He had really come. She didn't know how or why it had all led to this, why he never said, but she didn't care right then. Not about the mess, though she still grasped the mixtape so tightly her hands were sore from the pressure encapsulating it all. Right now, she simply walked in a straight and dreamy flow to that closed door. He was out there, he had come. She breathed with such a relief, a weight lifted, saying that everything would be fine. He would help her clean the mess, and i was valentine's and he had come. Everything was going to be fine.

"I'm here. Mike, I'm here." She whispered towards him, and her words flowed right through that simple barrier. Mike smiled delightfully, his own welling tears dashing off to the side and leaking now in a slow flow of release.

And then the door slowly opened.

They both saw each other, they both saw the look in each others' faces right then and there. The errors each made, the inexperience in their decisions, none of that mattered at that point.

And without one more word, Mike and El scooped themselves into each other's arms and embraced for a long- a very long time. For them, this day had only just begun...